

Your Dog's Hidden Cry for Help

Unveil the crucial component of canine care that is neglected by many, and how regular attention to this detail can reduce the risk of disease and promote a longer, healthier life for your pet.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dental/periodontal disease in dogs is widespread, yet many pet parents still aren't heeding the call to pay more attention to their dog's oral health
- There are many signs of mouth pain and dental or gum disease in pets; since our dogs can't talk to us, it's important to know what to look for
- Keeping your dog's teeth clean and his mouth healthy means feeding the right diet, offering recreational bones or dental chews, daily brushing, and regular veterinary exams
- Dogs' teeth are similar in some ways to human teeth — but there are also many differences

February is pet dental health month, the purpose of which is to raise awareness about the importance of caring for pets' teeth and gums. According to studies, dental calculus and gingivitis are the most commonly reported disorders by veterinarians,¹ and in addition, 80% of dogs have some form of periodontal disease by age 2.²

Unfortunately, despite these dire statistics and veterinary recommendations to regularly brush their dog's teeth, few pet parents actually do it. In 2016, Ipsos reported that while 76% of pet parents know they should brush their dog's teeth, just 7% do it daily, and 43% admit they never do it.³

"Just as with people a hundred years ago, we used to think that tooth loss was a normal aging change," Dr. Milinda Lommer, a board-certified veterinary dentist told PetMD. "Now we know that tooth loss is the direct result of a disease process and it is not normal."

Signs of Oral Disease in Your Dog

Signs of mouth problems in dogs are usually subtle in the beginning but can progress rapidly to a painful (and costly) situation that compromises your pet's quality of life. Symptoms of tooth and/or gum disease include:

- Redness of the gums
- Tenderness around the mouth and/or teeth
- Bad breath
- Drooling or dropping food
- Loose teeth
- Bleeding from the mouth
- Discolored teeth

- Loss of appetite/poor appetite
- Broken teeth
- Weight loss

If you notice any of these signs in your pet, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian.

Top 5 Signs Your Pet's Mouth Is Painful

Since our animal companions can't talk to us and are often stoic even in the face of significant discomfort, it's important to look for other clues. There are 5 primary signs of dental pain in dogs:⁴

1. **No signs at all** — Dogs and other companion animals rarely show signs of dental pain. This is a survival mechanism, an instinctual behavior that our domesticated animals have in common with their wild ancestors.
2. **Bad breath** — The odor is a byproduct of the bacterial metabolic process. In pets with periodontal disease, there are more bacteria in the mouth, and so the odor increases. "Doggy breath" is not normal and needs to be evaluated.
3. **Altered behavior** — Chewing on one side of the mouth, dropping food, running away from the food dish, crying when yawning, hiding, and acting "grumpy" are all signs of dental pain. You know your dog better than anyone, so look for abnormal behaviors.
4. **Bleeding** — Bleeding from the mouth is usually due to periodontal disease, but it could also be evidence of **fractured teeth**, lacerations or ulcers on the tongue or gum tissue or the presence of an oral mass.

Look for thick, ropery saliva, spots of blood found on toys or beds or drops of blood in the water or food dish. If the periodontal disease is severe enough, you may notice bleeding from the nose or bloody discharge when your dog sneezes.

5. **Return to normal** — Once your veterinarian addresses your pet's oral issues, your pooch may show he's feeling better by acting like a puppy again.

I would add that if you can see red, inflamed gums in your pet's mouth, or teeth with an obvious buildup of brown or greenish plaque and tartar, you can assume that if your dog isn't already in pain, he will be soon without intervention.

5 Tips to Keep Your Dog's Teeth Clean and His Mouth Healthy

1. Feed a **nutritionally balanced, species-specific, fresh food diet**, and feed it raw if possible. When your dog gnaws on raw meat, it acts as a kind of natural toothbrush and dental floss.
2. Offer **recreational bones** and/or a fully digestible, high quality dental dog chew to help control plaque and tartar. The effect of dental chews is similar to raw bones, but safer for power chewers or dogs with restorative dental work who can't chew raw bones.
3. Brush your pet's teeth, preferably every day. If every day is too tall an order, commit to do it several times a week. A little time spent each day brushing your dog's teeth can reap tremendous rewards in terms of his oral health and overall well-being.

When plaque isn't removed from your dog's teeth, it collects there and around the gum line and within a few days hardens into tartar. Tartar sticks to the teeth and ultimately irritates the gums. Irritated gums become

inflamed — a condition known as gingivitis.

If your dog has gingivitis, the gums will be red rather than pink and his breath may be noticeably stinky. If the tartar isn't removed, it will build up under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that become repositories for additional bacteria.

At this stage, your pet has developed an irreversible condition, periodontal disease, which causes considerable pain and can result in abscesses, infections, loose teeth and bone loss.

How quickly this process takes place in your dog's mouth depends on a number of factors, including his age, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the frequency and quality of dental care he receives.

4. Perform routine mouth inspections. Your dog should allow you to open his mouth, look inside, and feel around for loose teeth or unusual lumps or bumps on the tongue, under the tongue, along the gum line and on the roof of his mouth. After you do this a few times, you'll become aware of any changes that occur from one inspection to the next. You should also make note of any differences in the smell of your dog's breath that aren't diet related.
5. Arrange for regular oral exams performed by your veterinarian. He or she will alert you to any existing or potential problems in your pet's mouth, and recommend professional teeth cleaning under anesthesia, if necessary.

If you're vigilant about your dog's dental home care and he doesn't have any special situations that predispose him to tartar build-up or other dental issues, he may never need a professional cleaning by a veterinarian. However, pets with extreme tartar build-up, badly inflamed gums, or oral infections need extra help.

Did You Know ...? Fascinating Facts About Your Dog's Teeth

Now that we've covered the prevalence of dental disease in dogs, signs and symptoms to watch for, and prevention tips, let's take a lighter look at your canine companion's choppers!

1. **He has two sets, just like you do** — Young humans have baby teeth; young dogs have **puppy teeth**. Known as deciduous or milk teeth, puppy teeth begin making way for adult teeth at around four months of age. The first set of teeth become loose and eventually fall out, and the roots are absorbed into the gums. The process is complete at around six months — much quicker than the rate at which human baby teeth fall out and are replaced with permanent teeth.
2. **She has lots more permanent teeth than you do** — Interestingly, there are only 28 puppy teeth, but 42 adult teeth in dogs. Humans have 32; cats have 30. Adult teeth in dogs actually begin to form before birth and erupt into their assigned positions as the puppy teeth "exfoliate" or fall out.
3. **They are the teeth of a carnivore** — As I'm sure you've noticed, the size and shape of your dog's teeth are very different from your own. Incisors are the teeth in the very front of the mouth; vegan animals have big front teeth (think rabbits and horses) for grasping grasses and carnivores have tiny front rows of teeth (think cats and dogs). The most obvious teeth in the front of your dog's mouth are the large canines, which are long and pointy and perfect for grasping, lifting, tearing, and if necessary, for defense. Further back are the large carnassial teeth, designed to shear against one another to slice things.

Human teeth, on the other hand, are designed more for grinding against one another to chew food.

4. **The roots are somewhat different from human tooth roots** — The roots of dogs' teeth are similar to ours, except the three upper molars have two roots, and the two lower molars have three roots. And the roots of dogs' teeth are surprisingly long. The part of each tooth you can see above the gum is only about 1/3rd the length of the entire tooth including the root. In the case of the incisors, what you can see is only about a quarter of the full length of the tooth including the root.
5. **They almost never develop cavities** — Dogs rarely get cavities because not only do they not consume as much sugar as we do, but the species of bacteria that causes cavities are almost never found in dogs' mouths. In addition, cavities tend to occur on the flat surfaces of teeth, and dogs don't have teeth with flat surfaces (because they aren't grinding grains and grasses).

Sources and References

¹ [Lund, E.M. et al. J Am Vet Med Assoc. 1999 May 1;214\(9\):1336-41](#)

² [Today's Veterinary Practice, March 1, 2012](#)

³ [Ipsos News, February 1, 2016](#)

⁴ [dvm360 Dental Pain Handout](#)
